

A

LETTER

TO THE

PRESIDENT OF THE ROYAL COLLEGE OF SURGEONS,

ON THE LATE PROCEEDINGS OF THAT BODY, REGARDING

HOMŒOPATHIC PRACTITIONERS.

BY

JAMES RUSSELL, M.D.

F.R.S.E., F.R.C.S.E., &c.

EDINBURGH:

JOHN GREIG & SON, MELBOURNE PLACE.

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PRESIDENT OF THE ROYAL COLLEGE OF
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15 LYNEDOCHE PLACE,
2d December 1851.

SIR,—When the billet of the Medico-Chirurgical Society announced a motion, “That the public profession of Homœopathy shall be held to disqualify for being admitted or remaining a member of the Medico-Chirurgical Society of Edinburgh,” I sent in my resignation, as I considered such discussion hostile to the object for which the Society was instituted,—the promotion of Medical Science. A perusal of the speeches made on the occasion (with closed doors, since published by authority) has confirmed that opinion. †

The Royal College of Surgeons had previously adopted the following resolutions:—

“1. The College having considered a series of resolutions transmitted by the Royal College of Physicians,* in regard to

* The following resolutions were agreed to by the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh:—

“1. That the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh did, several years ago, publicly express its opinion of homœopathy and homœopathic practitioners, by peremptorily declining to admit into its body a candidate for its Fellowship who belonged to that denomination; and, consequently, that no Fellow of the Col-

Homœopathy, feel called upon to express their opinion that the system so designated being entirely inconsistent with the principles professed by candidates for the diploma of the College of Surgeons, any Fellow or Licentiate who practises it, or countenances others in doing so, by meeting them in consultation, will justly incur the disapprobation of the College.

"2. That a copy of the above resolution be transmitted to the Royal College of Physicians."

Had I been aware beforehand that it was proposed to submit such resolutions to the College, I should have attended the meeting and entered my dissent. As I knew that the College had never investigated the subject, the resolutions seemed to me, at the time, to be a harmless ebullition of feeling on the part of some members, to which the rest had tacitly yielded, and I have not thought it necessary to take any notice of them since. But when the public interests are sacrificed,

lege can possibly be ignorant of the light in which all those who practise homœopathy are regarded by the College.

"2. The College regrets that, notwithstanding this decided expression of its opinion, more than one of its Fellows, after being admitted in a different character, have endangered the reputation of the College by becoming homœopathic practitioners; and the College expresses an earnest hope that these Fellows, seeing that they have thus virtually separated themselves from the College, will spontaneously sever their further connection with an Institution which repudiates them, and from which they can derive, as merely nominal Fellows, nothing else than a false position and a spurious credit.

"3. The College feels the more bound thus to express its opinion, seeing that those Fellows who have become homœopathists, and any other medical practitioners who follow homœopathy, must necessarily be aliens to the other Fellows, and to the profession at large; inasmuch as no Fellow of this College, or any other physician, can, by any possibility, without derogating from his own honour, and from the honour of the profession, meet practitioners of homœopathy in consultation, or co-operate with them in the other common duties of professional life.

"4. That although the College has not thought it expedient hitherto to take any active steps for disclaiming those Fellows who have become Homœopathic practitioners subsequently to their admission to the College, nevertheless, since it has the power of dealing summarily with those who act in a manner so unbecoming the character of a physician, it reserves its right to exercise that power when it shall be so advised."

and the rights of humanity violated,* when a gentleman of Professor Goodsir's high professional character feels himself constrained to such a course, avowedly on the ground, "that the College of Surgeons has in its corporate capacity interdicted its members from meeting homœopathic practitioners," I feel called upon publicly to disclaim these resolutions. They run counter to all the sentiments I imbibed from those under whose auspices I studied Medicine. I have no personal interest in

* I refer to the FACTS stated in the following letter :—

"SIR,—The first example of the operation of the recent resolution of the College of Surgeons, that none of its Fellows should co-operate with a certain class of physicians, has just come under my notice ; and as I consider it of importance that the case should be tried at the bar of public opinion by the principles of common sense and common humanity, I beg of you to give it the benefit of publication in your widely-circulated paper.

"A few nights ago, about ten o'clock, a respectable physician was sent for in great haste to see a gentleman just come from the country. He found his patient suffering from hernia, in great pain and danger. He administered some homœopathic medicine, and tried to reduce the tumour (as the return of the protruded intestines is technically called). He failed, and nothing seemed left but an operation. Not being himself an operating surgeon, he went for Professor Miller, who was out of town. He then went to another, comparatively unknown to the public, who said he could not go without first consulting Professor Goodsir ; accordingly, the physician and surgeon drove to the Professor of Anatomy. The surgeon went in and talked for about half an hour with Mr Goodsir, and then the physician was told that they could only go on condition that he did not *remain even in the house* during the operation, but gave up the poor sick man entirely to them. To save his patient's life the physician consented, and they drove to the house of the sufferer. On examining the tumour before proceeding to operate, it returned at once to its natural situation, showing that the medicine, more true to nature than the surgeons, had rendered their interference unnecessary.

"Now, sir, allow me to make a few remarks upon the principle of this surgical combination. The number of operating surgeons in any town is very small ; there being not more than six in such a town as this, it is quite easy for them to combine to effect any pur-

this dispute. I am not a practitioner of homœopathy, nor much versed in it as a system. But I have enjoyed better opportunities than most members of the College, of calmly watching the action of the remedies in a considerable number of acute diseases,—I would specially refer to Bronchitis, Scarlatina, Rheumatic Fever, and Croup,—and have been frequently surprised by their rapid and unequivocal success. The public are entitled to the benefit of these means of rapidly

pose they have in view. If they have the right to extort, under penalty of death, such an ignominious condition from a patient as that he shall dismiss out of his house his medical attendant, and perhaps only friend in the place, they may extort any thing else they please. If he must abandon his physician at the bidding of surgeons, may he not be compelled to abjure his faith, or to dedicate his fortune to some pious surgical charity? If once medical mortmain be admitted, it will prove infinitely more dangerous than clerical. The surgeon holds present sufferings in his hand, the priest only threats of future punishment. If the principle of such a trades-union be once admitted, the proud boast of medicine that it is broad as humanity itself, and ignores all differences of creeds, nations, languages, is at an end; and in some parts of Ireland we may have Orange surgeons who refuse to save the lives of the heretic Papists, while in others the Roman Catholic may recruit the ranks of his church by the victims won by the dexterous use of his scalpel. As regards homœopathy, it merely accelerates the period when, among the number of the many graduates of our University who are embracing the new faith, there shall be found some of more than average manual dexterity and anatomical knowledge, and less than average sensitiveness of feeling, who will devote themselves to pure surgery; and as regards Professor Goodsir, we acquit him of any personal animosity towards homœopathy, for some years ago he undertook to write pathological articles in the *British Journal of Homœopathy*, and only desisted for fear of offending his less liberal brethren; but we cannot justify this outrage on humanity, by the plea of his fearing the consequences of breaking the College law, without admitting the same extenuation for almost all the cruel deeds under which this earth has groaned, for fear is the parent of cruelty.—I am, &c.

“J. RUTHERFURD RUSSELL.

“75 Queen Street.”

cutting short disease, and greatly hastening convalescence, and to the services of those who understand the use of them. Seeing that homœopathic practitioners are men, equal,—in respect of scientific education, powers of observing, and personal character,—to other members of the profession, is it not natural to ask why, in this country alone amongst the nations, a course so unusual should be adopted towards them by their professional brethren? I cannot understand it. I set aside, as irrelevant, all personalities, and adopt the language applied by a great ornament* of the profession to another controversy:—"Yet have I not so shaken hands with those desperate Resolutioners,—who had rather venture at large their decayed bottom, than bring her in to be new trimmed in the dock, who had rather promiseuously retain all, than abridge any, and obstinately be what they are, than what they have been,—as to stand in diameter and swords-point with them; we have reformed from them, not against them; for—omitting those impropriations and terms of scurrility betwixt us, which only difference our affections and not our cause,—there is between us one common name and appellation, one faith, and necessary body of principles common to us both." All my feelings towards the College are kindly, and the College knows that they are so. With many of its members I have always been, and trust I shall continue to be, on the most friendly footing. In the meeting of the Medico-Chirurgieal Society, some were spoken of as holding up "all the best acknowledged principles of our medical philosophy and practice—principles that have stood the test of thousands of years—as delusions and errors." I have not so spoken, nor has any one ever spoken so in my hearing. I would have proved but an impatient listener. But while I have been no denouncer of prevailing modes of treatment, I have, as occasion offered, solicited the attention of my brethren to other modes which I

* Sir T. Browne, *Religio Medici*.

had seen to be more successful, deeming it, as I still do, the duty of every practitioner to use the means by which the sufferings of his patient may be most safely and speedily removed, looking to facts rather than to systems. To be told, as a reason for not putting them to the test, that these remedies are called Homœopathic, and that Homœopathy is absurd, has always seemed to me to be trifling with the best interests of humanity, when eminent physicians, at home and abroad, have given ample evidence of the superior efficiency of these remedies, and courted inquiry.

Were the position *Similia similibus curantur* the exclusive possession of one party, and *Contraria contrariis curantur* the equally acknowledged exclusive possession of the other, as every remedy may be arranged under one or other of these general laws, a catalogue might be prepared of the articles belonging to each, and a scientific chart of their respective territories laid down; the wide province of Sympathy here, of Antipathy yonder. Our old Scottish Borderers were not good at keeping the marches, under the most vigilant wardens. Will the parties in the present feud reciprocally bind themselves not to trespass on one another's domain? So confident are many homœopathists of the universality of the law of *similia*, that they would, I believe, consent to restrict themselves to remedies acting under it. But no allopathist would by any means abide a true subject to the law of *contraria*. It would involve heavy losses, stripping him at once of vaccination and of all the specifics. By him the homœopathic law is "reviled and loved, renounced and followed." He is not wedded to it, but he has no wish to shake himself free of its bonds.

"One foot on sea and one on land,
To one thing constant, never."

This may be quite right. In politics it is said to be so.*

* "Nunquam enim præstantibus in republicâ gubernandâ viris laudata est in unâ sententiâ perpetua permansio, sed ut in navigando tempestatî obsequi artis

True medical science may require the reverting from one law to the other, as a good citizen may require to be alternately landsman and sailor; but it is not possible, at the same time, for science to hold a position antagonistic to those who are steadfast to one law. There may be the scope of two elements instead of one, but the man who is sometimes at sea is not *contrary* to him who is always on shore. It is a subject for practical investigation, to ascertain out of which of these classes of agents the most successful remedy, for any given disease, is to be taken; and in leading proof on the subject, those who favour the one or the other class of remedies might profitably co-operate, each making out the best case they can, till free discussion has sifted the evidence and matured experience given judgment. Homœopathists may be wrong in so restricting themselves. It may turn out that they are unwarrantably limiting the resources of the healing art; but this is the utmost that can possibly be established against them. While this is under probation, can science lay anything to their charge, to excuse the treatment now bestowed upon them?

But is there no other distinctive principle of homœopathy? None. Are not the doses always ludicrously minute? The opposite extreme has been no laughing matter to many. British endurance has been sorely taxed by the bulk and nauseousness of the drugs inflicted on the sick. If the homœopathic doses be over small and insipid, the matter might surely be adjusted amicably, for the question of quantity is, on both sides, avowedly regarded as an open one; and perhaps an ill taste might be imparted in any case in which it

est, etiãmsi portum tenere non queas; cùm verò id possis, mutatâ velificatione assequi, stultum est eum tenere eum periculo cursum quem ceperis, potiùs quàm, eo commutato, quò velis tamen pervenire: sic, cùm omnibus nobis in administrandâ republicâ propositum esse debeat, id quod à me sæpissimè dictum est, eum dignitate otium, non idem semper dicere, sed idem semper spectare debemus."—
CICERO.

was urgently wished by the patient. Are the germs of mortal diseases certainly larger than these doses?

Is it not absurd to expect results from such inert substances as some homœopathic remedies are? Sir E. Home once complained to Sir Joseph Banks that the natural philosophers would not give a hearing to some speculations and experiments of his about the circulation of the blood, saying the thing was physically impossible. He was encouraged, in a manner worthy of the President of the Royal Society of London,—“Never mind whether it be possible or not, if it be true.” Speculative impossibilities are daily disposed of. Steamboats cross the Atlantic in defiance of predictions from shallow philosophy; and one navigator sails over what seemed Red Mountains* to his predecessor, having enjoyed a better light and a nearer view. A submarine electric telegraph, reaching to France, would have been counted absurd enough some years ago. Competent observers say they have found these substances not inert. Let them be searchingly tested, and their proper scientific place assigned them.

I regret that, on this occasion, our College, instead of taking her usual place at the head of every generous movement, has followed in the train of other less dignified bodies, who have in various places been gesticulating of late

“With all the prettiness of feigned alarm,
And anger insignificantly fierce.”

To stand alone, Sir, in our College, as perhaps I now do, is not an enviable position; but I have occupied it before. The measures adopted by the profession, when cholera first attacked our city, seemed to me so objectionable, that at a meeting of the College of Surgeons I moved a series of resolutions, condemning the steps taken to search out and shut up every one suspected of having been near an infected place,

* Arctic Regions.

as an unwarrantable interference with personal liberty, and fitted to lead to dangerous concealments. I did not then find a public seconder, though some members privately expressed to me a general concurrence in my motion. During the lapse of years, ere we were again visited with this fearful scourge, sounder views had made progress; and no repetition of the former steps was proposed. I take encouragement from this in the present instance. Allured for a moment from her proper post of shielding from ignorant prejudices (in which the noble-hearted Dr Chalmers* formerly lent his aid), those who are seeking, by strictly scientific investigation, to promote the health of the community and increase the resources of the healing art, the College has joined in seeking to excite the community with the panic cry,

.... "O miseri, quæ tanta insania, cives? . . .
Quicquid id est, timeo Danaos, et dona ferentes."

But this will not last. Very shortly I expect to see the profession no longer shunning the persons or slighting the gifts of homœopathists, having signally failed in persuading others to do so. Meanwhile, I trust at least that the public will not be denied the unquestionable benefit of some remedies on which homœopathists have succeeded in fixing attention; for example—Aconite, in lessening febrile action; Arnica, as an external application; Belladonna, in scarlet fever, and, as publicly attested by Mr Liston, a most competent judge, also in erysipelas.

I have the honour to be,

SIR,

Your obedient servant,

JAMES RUSSELL

* Life, vol. iii. p. 31.

POSTSCRIPT.

15 LYNEDOCH PLACE, 9th Dec. 1851.

The following Resolution of the Council of the Royal College of Surgeons of England has just reached me.

J. R.

“That the Council have attentively and repeatedly considered the various communications which they have received on the subject of homœopathy ; and after mature deliberation, have resolved, that it is not expedient for this College to interfere in the matter.”

